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THE UNICORN RETURNS TO THE DESERT

by Thomas Land

GENEVA, IDRC -- The Arabian oryx, one of the world's rarest animals, has been re-introduced to its original habitat in a wildlife oasis of the Omani Desert in a project likely to lead to a new approach to livestock as well as game management in arid regions.

The first full herd of 10 was released under the care of a nomadic tribe -- and a jubilant spokesman for the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) recently announced the birth of the first calf in its native habitat.

Operation Oryx is one of the outstanding success stories of the global nature conservation movement -- and it may well be a lot more besides. For the scheme is likely to lead to rational new systems of game management across Africa and the Arabian Peninsula with the dual purpose of supplementing the high-quality protein derived from domestic livestock production and avoiding over-exploitation which might lead to the extinction of some wild species.

The creamy white antelope with the long straight horns (which look like the legendary single horn when seen in profile) once roamed the deserts of Arabia and Mesopotamia. Unicorn legends go back to ancient times. The unicorn became popular in European mediaeval folklore, tapestries and art, symbolizing purity, magical powers and courtly love.

Now it may also become the symbol of a fresh approach to livestock and game management in arid and semi-arid regions where many millions of people live at the edge of starvation. A specialist spokesman for WWF in Geneva, which has organized Operation Oryx, says it is "part of a major effort to establish a

large and well managed conservation area in the Arabian Peninsula. The presence of the oryx herd may well enhance the area's tourist potential and be a source of breeding stock for other Middle East nations wishing to re-introduce the animal.

In the long-term, he adds, "controlled utilization of the oryx may be possible". Specialists of the London Zoological Society, working under the auspices of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, have already visited several countries seeking suitable game reserves in the southern Sahara where various relatives of the oryx still survive in the wild, and can be reared as a carefully controlled and sustained source of food.

Eland are already farmed in many countries including Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The idea, explored by several universities of the region in a programme coordinated by the United Nations, is to utilize wild species which thrive in arid zones much too sparse to maintain domestic herds.

The Arabian oryx's movements in the wild have never been well understood. Their eyesight is keen, and they can disappear quickly into the sands when humans approach. They are known to wander over very great distances in search of areas of recent rainfall; and they can go for months without drinking, relying only on desert grasses and herbs for moisture.

Variations of the unicorn myth were the species' undoing. Many believe that eating the meat of the animal can expel a bullet from a gunshot wound. Killing a creature of such great strength and endurance is regarded by some as evidence of manhood. Its powdered horn has been used as an aphrodisiac. And the prince of the desert, who would outrun with ease the traditional camel-back hunting parties of the region, was finally brought down by the advent of four-wheel-drive vehicles and automatic weapons.

Its return to the desert was made possible by the cooperation of the academic community as well as many individuals and private and governmental organizations. The first herd was re-introduced to its original habitat under the protection of the Harasis, a tribe of 500, who consider their unique task a

great honour. They were chosen because of their concern for nature conservation and their knowledge of the oasis in the desert where the animals have been set free.

They prepared the animals for their freedom, caring for them in special enclosures for over a year. The first calf born in the wild was conceived during that time. Several females are now pregnant. After five years of drought the area has received a long-awaited rainfall and will soon be covered with new vegetation. This will aid the raising of the young and should promote further breeding.

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